

Providing counseling is a challenge in school

By Erin Borla
Correspondent

Over the course of the last several years many events have lead to a major shift in school counseling and mental-health services within the Sisters School District. Currently, there is only one certified school counselor is employed by the District: Charlie Kanzig at Sisters High School.

The lack of traditional school counselors at each school does not mean children within the District are not being served for their mental-health needs (*see story, page 3*).

Through creative thinking from past counselor Dan Saraceno, collaborative partnerships and unique programming, each school has had five-day-a-week care provided by private mental health providers; funded through a combination of county support and grants.

With so many moving parts communication is difficult — both ways — between administration and contracted services.

At Sisters Middle School, Brook Jackson, paid for by a grant, serves as the counselor and mental-health provider, while Wendy Vernon and Jennifer Noble share duties as mental-health providers at Sisters Elementary School. Tori Farr is finishing her last year as a service provider working with students at both the elementary and middle school.

Kanzig at the high school serves as the only full-time counselor for the 436 students. He has additional support — especially for juniors and seniors in their post-graduate planning needs

— from the ASPIRE program and Theresa Wadden, a private college counselor.

All three schools have classroom preventative training supported by the school nurses and health teachers.

In order to try to streamline communication, last fall the District placed counseling services under the review of Mark Stewart, the director of student services.

“Currently we are using the triage model (for counseling),” says Stewart. “I would like to see us shift back to a comprehensive counseling model.”

“The current situation was a great way to provide counseling services to kids where we (as a District) may have had none,” says Sisters School District Superintendent Curt Scholl. “It’s been a great partnership — but it hasn’t been an ideal situation.”

What would be ideal? According to Scholl and several of the service providers, having a licensed school counselor employed by the District at each of the three Sisters schools. The employed counselors would be able to provide preventative support in the classroom, teacher support and other counseling duties as well as coordinate long-term, mental-health support.

It sounds as though the District is moving in that direction. In preliminary budget reports for 2016-2017, there will be a full-time counselor at Sisters Middle School, paid for by the District.

Under the new structure the position will serve the student body at Sisters Middle School and add some time at the elementary school.

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support. Some are struggling with trauma, depression, feeling unmotivated, anxious or lonely. Some have suicidal thoughts.

“I believe all kiddos could use some extra support at school,” says Tori Farr, a private contractor working with both elementary and middle school students through the Sisters schools. School can be a tough time and it’s important to help kids navigate friendships and academics.”

Each school has five-day-a-week support through several contractors. While, there is no certified school counselor employed by the District at either the middle or elementary school, there are mental health professionals. Currently all are funded through grants. There is also additional support, although not financial, from the School Based Health Center and Deschutes County Mental Health.

Working with so many moving parts in the counseling department makes it challenging to have an effective communication strategy for the administration at each school and across the District. While the current dynamic is not ideal — it has enabled the students to be cared for.

Approximately 30 percent of the student population at

Sisters Elementary School has seen one of the three mental-health professionals this year — Jennifer Noble, Wendy Vernon, and Tori Farr. Not all of those students are working through long-term issues.

“There are big Ts and little Ts (traumas),” says Jennifer Noble. “Not every child that comes in and talks with me has large traumatic events or needs long-term mental health support. Some have had a rough time because their dog just passed away. Others may be having trouble adjusting to a new school or trouble making friends, the ‘little Ts’. But, if the little Ts pile up, they create a bigger issue.”

Students can be referred to services from a teacher or administrator who may notice a change in the child’s behavior. Parents can also make an appointment for their own child.

“My first call is always to the parents or guardians,” says Noble. “Just to share with them their student may be having some trouble. We are here for the students. Hopefully, if there is an issue at home, the family can help shine some light on that prior to talking with the student.”

As students get older and transition into the middle and high school they are beginning to create their own identity, often pushing their boundaries away from their family.

“You throw in hormones and changes in the brain, suddenly small things can seem like big things,” says

Brook Jackson, the mental-health contractor at Sisters Middle School.

Sometimes that transition can be as difficult for parents as it is for the student.

“We start every school year telling the students that middle school can be really hard,” says Jackson. “Struggles are normal. It’s okay to be uncomfortable and face challenges. It’s okay to fail. We don’t like to call it failing — but rather learning what not to do.”


Charlie Kanzig, the only certified school counselor employed by the Sisters School District, is housed at Sisters High School (SHS).

“I became a school counselor because I didn’t have additional support (from the guidance counselor) in high school,” says Kanzig. “We are working on both education issues and mental-health issues.”

Even though Kanzig is the only counselor at the high school level, he believes there are teachers and other staff that support the students throughout their time at SHS.

Both the school nurse and the health teacher provide lessons on suicide, depression, self-harm and stress management. With the help of the ASPIRE coordinator and the program’s volunteer mentors, as well as Theresa Wadden, a private college counselor, who serves as the school’s college specialist, post-graduation support is well-managed.

“It’s difficult to slip through the cracks,” Kanzig says



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